

The Three Conflicting ‘Goods’ of Engineering Management

What do you mean, there are three definitions of ‘good’?

Performative good

What gets rewarded right now, by your company or the industry



Contextual good

What works right now, given your org’s size, stage and industry



Moral good

What you believe is right.

Equity, helping others, leaving things better than you found them




The Mythical Man Month

What gets rewarded, right now – by your org and/or the industry

Performative good





Why we reward

To turn what we value into what people do



What are rewards

Promotions · Praise · Pay · Protection



What earns them

Visibility · Pedigree · Agreement · Popularity

What gets rewarded, right now – by your org and/or the industry

Performative good





What it drives

CV-, Promotion- and Hype-Driven-Development · Echo Chambers



What it costs

Resentment · Loss of trust · Invisible work undone



Why it happens

Rewarding A, hoping for B · Goodhart's law

> *When a behaviour is rewarded, it can cease to be a good behaviour.*

"When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure." Goodhart's law as phrased by Marilyn Strathern, 1997
"On the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B." Steven Kerr, Academy of Management Journal, 1975



Right here, right now – Fatboy Slim (1999)

What works given current reality, often specific to your organisation

Contextual good





The question

Does it work here, right now?



What it depends on

Size · Stage · Scale · Industry ·
People · Skills · Maturity · History



Same question, different answer

15 vs 5,000 engineers
Pre vs post product-market fit
Hypergrowth vs steady state
1,000 vs 1 billion users
Co-located vs five time zones
Bank vs indie games studio

Dropbox, “Moving 500 petabytes of user data into our Magic Pocket” (2016)
Netflix, “Announcing the Netflix Open Connect Network” (2012)

What works given current reality, often specific to your organisation

Contextual good





The question

Does it work here, right now?



What it depends on

Size · Stage · Scale · Industry ·
People · Skills · Maturity · History



Same question, different answer

15 vs 5,000 engineers
Pre vs post product-market fit
Hypergrowth vs steady state
1,000 vs 1 billion users
Co-located vs five time zones
Bank vs indie games studio

Dropbox, “Moving 500 petabytes of user data into our Magic Pocket” (2016)
Netflix, “Announcing the Netflix Open Connect Network” (2012)

What you believe is right





Values easy to agree on

Give credit · Be honest · Look after your team



Harder to hold under pressure

Credit at promo time · Not gaming metrics · Hard feedback



Where good managers disagree

Fair pay · Redundancies · Exiting low performers

Schoar & Zuo, “Shaped by Booms and Busts: How the Economy Impacts CEO Careers and Management Styles”, Review of Financial Studies (2017)

What you believe is right





Values easy to agree on

Give credit · Be honest · Look after your team



Harder to hold under pressure

Credit at promo time · Not gaming metrics · Hard feedback



Where good managers disagree

Fair pay · Redundancies · Exiting low performers

Schoar & Zuo, “Shaped by Booms and Busts: How the Economy Impacts CEO Careers and Management Styles”, Review of Financial Studies (2017)

Senior-only hiring starts with all three goods but can end with none

1 · The why

AI investment is expensive, so leadership looks to cut costs elsewhere

A strong senior engineer with AI can do the work of a small pod, so leadership stops hiring juniors



All three agree it’s good

2 · The how

Headcount frozen, budgets cut

Managers who backfill with AI, not people, are praised for efficiency

Time ‘saved’ removing junior onboarding and internships



Works right now and is rewarded

3 · The resistance

A manager hires and mentors two juniors anyway

They miss their headcount & budget target and it shows in their review

Managers leave



No good dead goes unpunished

4 · The result

Five years on, seniors leave and no one is ready to step up

Companies fight over a shrinking talent pool, engineers become even more expensive

Now they’re out of budget



None of the three

Senior-only hiring starts with all three goods but can end with none

1 · The why

AI investment is expensive, so leadership looks to cut costs elsewhere

A strong senior engineer with AI can do the work of a small pod, so leadership stops hiring juniors



All three agree it's good

2 · The how

Headcount frozen, budgets cut

Managers who backfill with AI, not people, are praised for efficiency

Time 'saved' removing junior onboarding and internships



Works right now and is rewarded

3 · The resistance

A manager hires and mentors two juniors anyway

They miss their headcount & budget target and it shows in their review

Managers leave



No good dead goes unpunished

4 · The result

Five years on, seniors leave and no one is ready to step up

Companies fight over a shrinking talent pool, engineers become even more expensive

Now they're out of budget



None of the three



Three eras, one job title

"Good management" is also different across eras

2000S

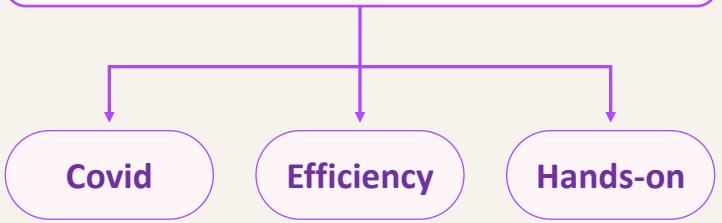
Know the business, navigate politics, protect engineers

2010S

Stop coding, attract and retain talent

2020S

The efficiency era – higher technical literacy



2000S

2000 – 2009

Know the business Pick the target Clear the obstacles

Managers managed, Tech was optional.

2010S

2010 – 20018

Money is cheap: hiring is the constraint

Ex-engineers, but hiring was the job.

COVID

Mar 2020 – early 2022

Remote work, the hottest job market

Developer boom. Managers worth more coordinating than coding.

EFFICIENCY

Mar 2022 – 2025

Flattening or correction?

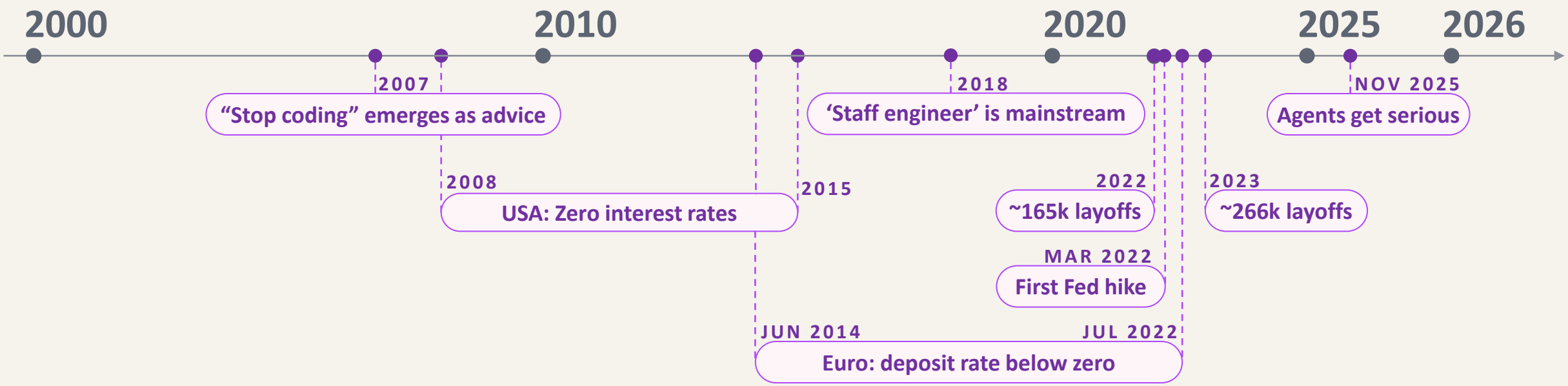
Rates rise 2022. ~165k tech layoffs . Flattening continues in 2023

HANDS-ON

Nov 2025, 2026 -> ?

Managers can code again

The ‘tech lead’ style manager is back in demand



Sources: US Federal Reserve and ECB rate decisions · Layoffs.fyi (tech companies worldwide) · Meta 2023 filing and staff message · Amazon CEO memo, 16 September 2024 · CNBC on Google managers, 2025 · Microsoft layoffs, May 2025

2000S

2000 – 2009

Know the business Pick the target Clear the obstacles

Managers managed, Tech was optional.

2010S

2010 – 20018

Money is cheap: hiring is the constraint

Ex-engineers, but hiring was the job.

COVID

Mar 2020 – early 2022

Remote work, the hottest job market

Developer boom. Managers worth more coordinating than coding.

EFFICIENCY

Mar 2022 – 2025

Flattening or correction?

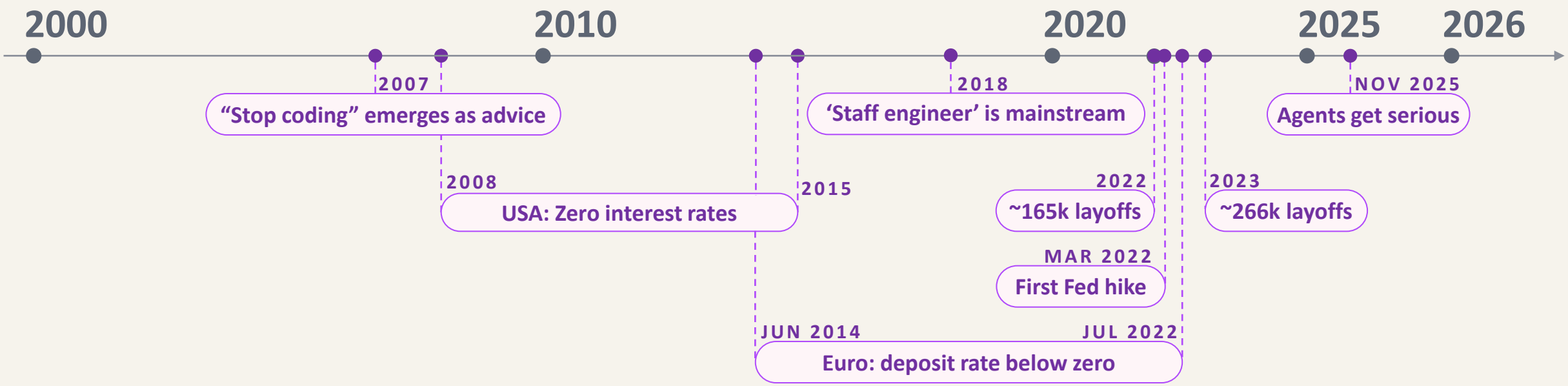
Rates rise 2022. ~165k tech layoffs . Flattening continues in 2023

HANDS-ON

Nov 2025, 2026 -> ?

Managers can code again

The ‘tech lead’ style manager is back in demand



Sources: US Federal Reserve and ECB rate decisions · Layoffs.fyi (tech companies worldwide) · Meta 2023 filing and staff message · Amazon CEO memo, 16 September 2024 · CNBC on Google managers, 2025 · Microsoft layoffs, May 2025

2000S

2000 – 2009

Know the business Pick the target Clear the obstacles

Managers managed, Tech was optional.

2010S

2010 – 20018

Money is cheap: hiring is the constraint

Ex-engineers, but hiring was the job.

COVID

Mar 2020 – early 2022

Remote work, the hottest job market

Developer boom. Managers worth more coordinating than coding.

EFFICIENCY

Mar 2022 – 2025

Flattening or correction?

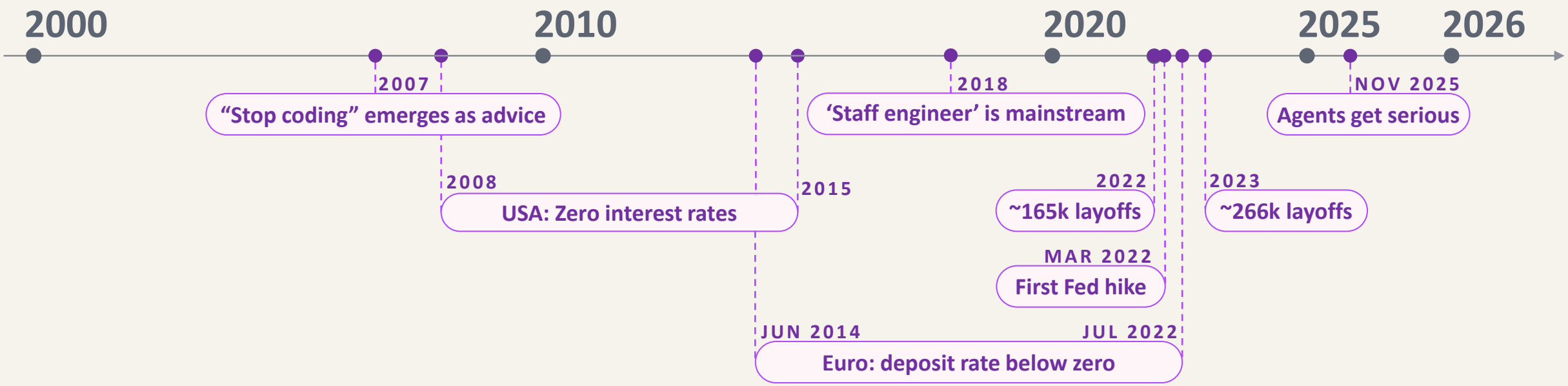
Rates rise 2022. ~165k tech layoffs . Flattening continues in 2023

HANDS-ON

Nov 2025, 2026 -> ?

Managers can code again

The ‘tech lead’ style manager is back in demand



Sources: US Federal Reserve and ECB rate decisions · Layoffs.fyi (tech companies worldwide) · Meta 2023 filing and staff message · Amazon CEO memo, 16 September 2024 · CNBC on Google managers, 2025 · Microsoft layoffs, May 2025

THE ENGINE

Each era narrates its economics as a virtue

CAUSE	STORY IT TOLD
Capital is cheap; hire aggressively	*“Empowering engineers is fundamentally good”*
Funding ended; cut costs	*“Bureaucratic management has made us stale”*

Management fashion: a transitory collective belief, spread by fashion setters, that a technique is rational progress.

Abrahamson (1996), Academy of Management Review

THE ENGINE

Each era narrates its economics as a virtue

CAUSE	STORY IT TOLD
Capital is cheap; hire aggressively	*“Empowering engineers is fundamentally good”*
Funding ended; cut costs	*“Bureaucratic management has made us stale”*

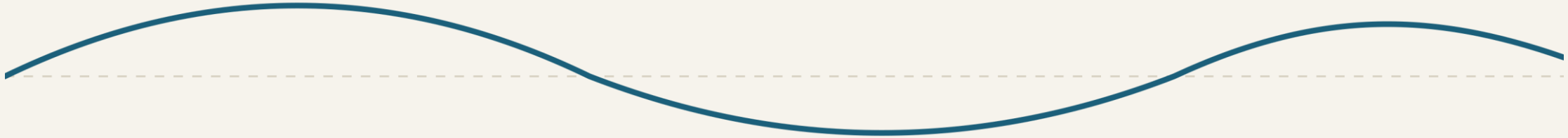
Management fashion: a transitory collective belief, spread by fashion setters, that a technique is rational progress.

Abrahamson (1996), Academy of Management Review

THE ENGINE

Management rhetoric tracks the economy, and upswing talk comes without conditions

LONG ECONOMIC WAVES



The rhetoric of managing employees tracks these waves

Abrahamson, 1997

Upswing discourse is emotional and unqualified

Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999

German and Dutch scholarship on management fashion (Kieser; Benders and Van Veen)

ERA WALK · THE EARLY 2000S

In the 2000s, ‘good’ meant shielding engineers from politics

REWARDED	Navigating organisational politics; shielding the team
CONTEXT	Post dot-com bubble burst; heavy process; software seen as a cost centre
STORY IT TOLD	*“Leave engineers alone”*

DeMarco & Lister, Peopleware 2nd ed. (1999) · Spolsky, The Joel Test (2000) and The Development Abstraction Layer (2006) · Lopp, Managing Humans (2007) · Todd Jackson, Gmail, SXSW via TechCrunch (2010) · HBR, How Google Sold Its Engineers on Management (2013)

ERA WALK · THE 2010S

In the 2010s, cheap money made “stop coding” look like wisdom

REWARDED	Attracting and retaining talent; stepping back from code
CONTEXT	Cheap money; hire aggressively; retention is the constraint
STORY IT TOLD	*“Empowering engineers is fundamentally good”*

After 2022: fewer engineering managers, wider remits, the tech lead rises.

Sources: Pragmatic Engineer on ZIRP-era practices · Axios, 26 February 2024

THREE GOODS

One famous finding reads differently under each good

GOOGLE, PROJECT OXYGEN

About 10,000 manager observations; technical expertise ranked 8th of 8 behaviours

PERFORMATIVE

Gave managers intellectual cover to stop coding.

CONTEXTUAL

Artz, Goodall and Oswald (2017): a boss's technical competence is the strongest predictor of a worker's job satisfaction.

MORAL

"Technical skill is the least important thing" hardens into a belief about what a good manager is.

Sources: Inc. on Project Oxygen · Artz, Goodall and Oswald (2017), ILR Review 70(2)

THREE GOODS

One famous finding reads differently under each good

GOOGLE, PROJECT OXYGEN

About 10,000 manager observations; technical expertise ranked 8th of 8 behaviours

PERFORMATIVE

Gave managers intellectual cover to stop coding.

CONTEXTUAL

Artz, Goodall and Oswald (2017): a boss's technical competence is the strongest predictor of a worker's job satisfaction.

MORAL

"Technical skill is the least important thing" hardens into a belief about what a good manager is.

Sources: Inc. on Project Oxygen · Artz, Goodall and Oswald (2017), ILR Review 70(2)

THE 2020S DEBATE · HANDS-ON

“Hands-on” hides three different things, and only one is a cost decision

Technical leader

Understands the systems well enough to coach and decide, reviews code

Contextual: depends on team size, remit and team strength

In the codebase

Reads, reviews, prototypes, pairs to coach

Contextual: depends on team size, remit and team strength

IC load

A fixed share of your week delivering code, code makes it to production

Performative: often a cost decision labelled as a principle

THE 2020S DEBATE · HANDS-ON

“Hands-on” hides three different things, and only one is a cost decision

Technical leader Understands the systems well enough to coach and decide, reviews code	**Contextual:** depends on team size, remit and team strength
In the codebase Reads, reviews, prototypes, pairs to coach	**Contextual:** depends on team size, remit and team strength
IC load A fixed share of your week delivering code, code makes it to production	**Performative:** often a cost decision labelled as a principle

MORAL GOOD

My instincts are dated, and so are yours



Where did you form your first strong view of good?

MORAL GOOD

My instincts are dated, and so are yours



Where did you form your first strong view of good?

MORAL GOOD

Efficacy quietly turns into morality; one question separates habit from conviction

THE ENGINEER-MANAGER PENDULUM

Stay technical ⇄ **Let go of code**

Staying technical gets framed as something you owe your team: a duty, not a tactic.

Would you defend it if it cost you the role?

Yes: a conviction; say what it is for.

Hesitate: a habit from an era; fine, but do not call it a principle.

Practitioner opinion: Majors (2017), Fournier · Theory: Lemoine et al., Academy of Management Annals

WHAT COMPOUNDS, WHAT CYCLES

Business cycles recur; technical complexity accumulates

Reverses

Headcount, spans, hiring appetite, the coding pendulum.



Compounds

Cloud, distributed systems and AI raise the baseline for understanding systems, while the cost of access to depth falls.



Plausibly permanent: AI review burden; measurable delivery; the pendulum as a normal career pattern.

WHAT COMPOUNDS, WHAT CYCLES

Business cycles recur; technical complexity accumulates

Reverses

Headcount, spans, hiring appetite, the coding pendulum.



Compounds

Cloud, distributed systems and AI raise the baseline for understanding systems, while the cost of access to depth falls.



Plausibly permanent: AI review burden; measurable delivery; the pendulum as a normal career pattern.

WHAT COMPOUNDS, WHAT CYCLES

AI moves all three goods at once, which is why this shift feels disorienting

PERFORMATIVE

What is rewarded is being rewritten: flattening, wider spans, AI adoption.

CONTEXTUAL

What works is shifting: the cost of depth falls; the review burden rises.

MORAL

A new story is forming: the agent manager.

Agent manager: an emerging role; most claims are in the future tense (HBR, February 2026).

Source: Harvard Business Review, Srinivasan and Wei, 12 February 2026

WHAT COMPOUNDS, WHAT CYCLES

AI moves all three goods at once, which is why this shift feels disorienting

PERFORMATIVE

What is rewarded is being rewritten: flattening, wider spans, AI adoption.

CONTEXTUAL

What works is shifting: the cost of depth falls; the review burden rises.

MORAL

A new story is forming: the agent manager.

Agent manager: an emerging role; most claims are in the future tense (HBR, February 2026).

Source: Harvard Business Review, Srinivasan and Wei, 12 February 2026

CLOSE

Three questions turn the framework into action

1. Which good am I serving: **what is rewarded**, **what works**, or **what I believe is right**?
2. When did I form this belief, and would I defend it if it cost me the role?
3. Will this skill still matter when the cycle turns?

Many conflicts are era mismatches, not skill gaps: your peer may be right about a different context.

CLOSE

Three questions turn the framework into action

1. Which good am I serving: **what is rewarded**, **what works**, or **what I believe is right**?
2. When did I form this belief, and would I defend it if it cost me the role?
3. Will this skill still matter when the cycle turns?

Many conflicts are era mismatches, not skill gaps: your peer may be right about a different context.

The framework is a question

Which ‘good’ do you mean?







The one that is rewarded, **the one that works,** **or the one that’s right?**

or just the one you learned?

Only then decide what you are prepared to defend

